

Something New, Something Old, Something Else
Philip Thomas - piano

L.Beethoven *Five Variations on 'Rule Britannia'* (c.1804)

R.Sharman *Opera Transcriptions, book 1* (1989-91)

C.Wolff *Bread and Roses* (1976)

C.Fox *Prime Site* (1996-7)

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C.Ives *Varied Air and Variations (Study No.2 for Ears or Aural and Mental Exercise!!!)* (1923)

A.Webern *Variations, op.27* (1936)
 (Sehr mäßig; Sehr schnell; Ruhig fließend)

L.C.Smith *A Nocturne* (1995) ** **European Premiere****

C.Fox *Republican Bagatelles* (2000-2003) ****World Premiere****

Tonight's concert is the second of two this season - and hopefully of more in the future - grouped together under the title *Something New, Something Old, Something Else*. The primary intention is that a major new work is commissioned from a composer whose music I find to be radical, original and ultimately inspiring. Then, an older work by the same composer is chosen to go alongside the new work and the programme is completed with works by other composers, from any musical period or style, that might demonstrate connections, traces, influences, or even disparities. These works have been selected after discussions between myself and the composers.

The two composers who have written new works this year - Richard Emsley for the first concert and Christopher Fox for tonight's concert - are composers whose music I first played in 2001 as part of my *John Cage and Twenty-first Century Britain* series at the Mappin Art Gallery. Since then I have heard and played more of their music in other contexts and have come to appreciate it in greater measure. Their music, though very different, beguiles, entrances and intrigues me. The origins for both works actually date from before I commissioned them. Both Richard and Christopher had casually mentioned ideas for new pieces and it didn't take me too long to find an appropriate and hopefully engaging context for which to commission them.

One of the most unusual features of Christopher Fox's musical output is its huge variety in style, on the surface at least. It is far removed from the notion of continually forging and honing a musical language that one could take ownership of, copyright, and subsequently claim authority over. Instead, Fox's obvious fascination and curiosity with

sound, form, tradition, and not least other art forms finds its release in a multiplicity of arenas and idioms, whether solo instrument, chamber group, electronics or tape media, and collaborations with artists, poets, etc. Likewise one can readily find works amongst Fox's output which involve indeterminacy, variable tuning systems, triadic-based harmony, complex metric and rhythmic schemes, and straight-forward 'traditional' rhythmic interplay. Indeed the unexpected becomes the expected when dealing with Fox's music (though the degree to which *Republican Bagatelles* differed from other works still managed to surprise me when I first saw it). In such a varied output it feels as if the composer is extending an invitation to join with him in an exploration into the nature of what it is to be a composer in our time. There is a generosity in the openness of Fox's ideas, embracing a wide and rich field of reference. We enter to explore for ourselves, to hear something new, but we also appreciate being guided by the expert hand and fine ear of the composer.

Fox is not alone in encompassing such diversity. One can think of Michael Finnissy as being a near contemporary who similarly refuses to be pinned down no matter how desiring commentators are to pigeon-hole and classify his music. But clearly the composer who most opened ears and released the notion of musical composition from the fetters of established methods was John Cage. It was Cage who embraced the widest possible field of reference and yet who also declared a good composition to be dependent upon how good a question it was that was being asked (yes, even Cage exercised value judgments). It seems to me that Christopher Fox asks interesting questions.

However, if the art of the composer was simply in asking good questions the end result might not necessarily be as enchanting as it is in the case of Fox's music. Like John Cage, Christopher Fox takes the act of composing extremely seriously. His finely tuned ear frequently leads to revelations in the area of harmony and tuning (as was personally the case in his recent *an der Schattengrenze*), and his devotion to the material at hand increases our appreciation often of the simplest of events. His consideration and sculpting of the material reveals most obviously the influence of the experimentalists upon Fox's aesthetic. The combination of discipline and a reluctance to 'mess' with the material allows events to be presented in a way that enables the listener to engage with the *sound* rather than where the sound *leads*. This is particularly true of *Prime Site* but even the rapid turnover of events in *Republican Bagatelles* fails to detract from the quality of the material in each section.

Finally, the way in which Fox gives events time to breathe, the fine attention to harmonic subtleties, and the embracing of tonality as well as microtonality, leads to music which is quite simply beautiful. This is one of the strongest impressions his music has consistently made upon me and the reason I look forward to each new piece.

Beethoven's Five Variations on 'Rule Britannia' is the second of two sets of variations upon British patriotic anthems. The first is a set of seven variations on 'God Save the King' and is one of the primary sources underlying Christopher Fox's *Republican Bagatelles* which ends tonight's concert. The variations on 'Rule Britannia', whilst not among Beethoven's most radical works, still reflects an innovative approach to the traditional variation form of which Beethoven was such a master. Particularly of

interest is the breaking down of the melody so that only snatches are glimpsed throughout the work, making these more like variations upon a harmonic theme than a melodic one.

Rule Britannia

a song by Thomas Augustine Arne, 1740

When Britain first at Heav'n's command
Arose from out the azure main;
This was the charter of the land,
And guardian angels sang this strain;

Thee haughty tyrants ne'er shall tame,
All their attempts to bend thee down
Will but arouse thy generous flame;
But work their woe, and thy renown.

Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves:
Britons never will be slaves.

Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves:
Britons never will be slaves.

The nations not so blest as thee,
Shall in their turns to tyrants fall;
While thou shalt flourish great and free,
The dread and envy of them all.

To thee belongs the rural reign;
They cities shall with commerce shine;
All thine shall be the subject main,
And every shore it circles thine.

Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves:
Britons never will be slaves.

Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves:
Britons never will be slaves.

Still more majestic shalt thou rise,
More dreadful from each foreign stroke;
As the loud blast that tears the skies,
Serves but to root thy native oak.

The Muses, still with freedom found,
Shall to thy happy coast repair;
Blest Isle! With matchless beauty crowned,
And manly hearts to judge the fair.

Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves:
Britons never will be slaves.

Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves:
Britons never will be slaves.

I get angry when I hear that word "empire"; it reminds me of slavery, it reminds me of thousands of years of brutality, it reminds me of how my foremothers were raped and my forefathers brutalised. It is because of this concept of empire that my British education led me to believe that the history of black people started with slavery and that we were born slaves, and should therefore be grateful that we were given freedom by our caring white masters. It is because of this idea of empire that black people like myself don't even know our true names or our true historical culture. I am not one of those who are obsessed with their roots, and I'm certainly not suffering from a crisis of identity; my obsession is about the future and the political rights of all people. Benjamin Zephaniah OBE - no way Mr Blair, no way Mrs Queen. I am profoundly anti-empire. (Benjamin Zephaniah, poet, after rejecting the offer of an OBE, 2003)

The first three Opera Transcriptions by Canadian composer Rodney Sharman (a second book makes the current number of pieces to be six) are based upon arias from operas by Puccini. In the order of performance they are 'La Canzone di Doretta' from *La*

Rondine, ‘Nessun Dorma’ from *Turandot*, and ‘Tu, tu, piccolo iddio’ from *Madama Butterfly*. Sharman began the series after hearing Michael Finnissy’s *Verdi Transcriptions*, a vast work for solo piano in which material taken from Verdi’s operas is radically transformed, at times unrecognizably so. Sharman, in his transcriptions (which are dedicated to the pianists Yvar Mikhashoff and Anthony de Mare), takes melodic fragments as the point of departure and transforms them through octave displacements, rhythmic changes, and different metres, often superimposed (to quite extraordinary effect in the *Turandot* transcription). The result is a rarefied but exquisitely beautiful response to Puccini’s work, both intimate and strangely removed.

Christian Wolff’s *Bread and Roses* is the first of a series of works based upon political, or ‘workers’, songs. The original song ‘Bread and Roses’ was written in 1912 during the great mill strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Wolff writes ‘it caught the voices and aspirations of the women who were, extraordinarily, taking a public part in the strike (the ensuing publicity was a crucial factor in the strike’s success).’ The melody, which is heard quite early on in the piece, is subjected to transformations by means of a curious mix of rhapsodic invention and fragmentation. The performer is free to choose tempi, dynamics and other expressive parameters. The composer’s deeply felt political and social concerns are reflected in a music which exudes beauty and generosity, both in the nature of the material and the dialogue forged between composer and performer. This is keenly felt in the final section which Wolff describes as ‘a kind of extension, reaching out, that I think of as in the character of the song.’

The title of Christopher Fox’s *Prime Site* suggests some kind of ‘ur-structure’, whereby form might be considered at its base level. In one sense the musical form of the piece is extraordinarily simple – seven sections of approximately equal length are juxtaposed. Each section is concerned with its own material type, though linked in various ways to other sections, and these are characterized by the nature of the piano itself and the capabilities of a single pianist. Hence the focus in the first and sixth sections upon the resonant qualities produced when notes are silently held whilst other notes are struck, and in the second and fourth sections where two simultaneous melodic streams are allowed to unravel (in the fourth section at different and continuously changing tempi). But, as Fox has written, this simplistic formal scheme is considerably more complex than it may appear:

Prime Site eschews repetition... the subject of the music is both the sound of the piano and this set of relationships, backwards and forwards through time across the work, setting up an increasingly complex counterpoint between the present and the past.

In the midst of composing Prime Site I came across an image from a medieval stained glass window showing Christ receiving the seven virtues. The virtues define Christ-likeness, but they are not themselves Christ. It struck me that what I was trying to write was music which, section by section, progressively reveals more of a musical subject but which never wholly represents the subject itself. That wholeness exists only in the listener’s mind.

The effect is a curious one – the listener is drawn to the beauty, simplicity, or however one perceives it, of the material itself, and traces its evolution moment by moment, only

to be confronted, after a period of time, by music which appears to be the polar opposite. However other elements within each section seem to remind one, however faintly, of earlier moments in the piece. The consequential disorientation is not dissimilar to that which one feels in the late works of Morton Feldman, such as the 90-minute *Triadic Memories*. The piece ends with a section of exquisite beauty which is left open, like the earlier sections, as if waiting for further material to appear.

Charles Ives' Varied Air and Variations is a comparatively late work, written more than a decade after the works for which he is most famous (the *Orchestral Sets*, *Third and Fourth Symphonies*, and *Concord Sonata*). The basic structure is that of a theme and variations, the theme being original and named in the score as 'line of rocks'. Ives further comments in the score with regard to the theme 'The old stone wall around the orchard – none of those stone eggs are the same size'. This is translated in musical terms by the theme consisting of durations of widely varying lengths. However, as one might expect from Ives, this is no traditional theme and variations. Ives places each section within the context of a piano recital before a rather hostile audience, no doubt reflecting the reactions Ives faced to his radical experimentation through so much of his life.

Thus the work opens with an eerie chordal motif which recurs after each section and which Ives refers to as signifying a protest in response to the music being played from the stage. After the third variation and its due protestation Ives prefaces the fourth variation with the words '16 nice measures, E minor just as much as possible! All right, Ladies, I'll play the rock line again and harmonize it nice and proper'. The fourth variation, then, is a hymn-like harmonization of the theme with a strong E minor pull but allowing for customary Ivesian deviations. The variation is obviously a success as it is met not with the usual protest but a resounding applause in C major. But the pianist responds to such narrow-mindedness by getting 'mad at them and starts to throw things at them again – he ought to be polite for he will not be engaged and paid at the next nice afternoon TEA concert!'.

Webern's Variations, op.27, is really only a set of variations in the third movement. However the very notion of serialism, the musical system upon which this work is based, and the continual transformation of the twelve-note row can be likened to constant pitch variation. Webern of all the serialists is the most lucid in his formal outworking of serialist principles and this work reflects Webern's concern in his late works for clarity and transparency. Despite the apparent 'coolness' of the late works, the Variations also reflect the warmth and tenderness of much of the earlier works and the rhythmic gestures and phrasing can be seen to be a continuation of the romantic tradition. The use of sevenths and ninths intervals don't simply point towards the pitch characteristics of the next generation of musical modernists, they also create a tender, 'bluesy' feel, a quality which appealed to the American experimentalists who, though rejecting the system which produced the notes, perceived a warmth and beauty in the sound.

The American-born (now based in Canada) composer Linda C. Smith is among the increasing number of composers who have been strongly influenced by the musical

aesthetic of Morton Feldman and other experimentalists. This is most clearly felt in her approach to musical time and space and which makes it often more appropriate to compare her work with visual artists, such as Rothko and Kline. Her keen ear for instrumental sonority and desire to allow the sound to express itself, favouring, in her piano writing, the decay produced through almost constant depression of the sustaining pedal, lends a bold sculptural quality to the way events are placed in time. This is particularly true of A Nocturne, which is characterized by basic triadic movement, often at extremes of the keyboard. The triad, a collection of notes which is so familiar, becomes transformed in this context as the listener is drawn to its essential qualities, rather than its tonal implications, and its obvious resonating features. As the piece unfolds however the triad becomes less of a feature as it both closes in to create clusters of tones and spreads out to form the sevenths and ninths intervals characteristic of the upper harmonics.

Republican Bagatelles by Christopher Fox takes as its inspiration the music of Beethoven and Ives. Both composers wrote sets of variations upon the tune which we know as the British national anthem, though which Ives refers to as 'America' in his variations for organ of 1891. Fox uses the variations by each composer by combining one with another. As there are seven variations by Beethoven and five by Ives, there are a total of 36 possible combinations, which is the number of 'bagatelles' in Fox's work.

Fox writes 'At the beginning of the piece the identity of individual bagatelles is quite clear, although as I worked with the materials my illustrious colleagues had provided I discovered that it was usually more interesting to omit direct reference to the metamorphosing tune and to concentrate on a single feature from each source. As the piece progresses the groups of bagatelles also fuse together into longer sections.' In addition to this formal process, there is another at work, affecting the nature of the harmonic and melodic progression throughout the piece: 'I also decided that, as the piece progressed, the tune would change slowly into the Christmas song 'O Tannenbaum' (also familiar as 'The Red Flag' - this piece is not republican in George W. Bush sense) before being gradually flattened out, until we are left with a single note.'

The clear formal scheme, partly due both to the derivation from variation form and the influence of Beethoven in particular, allows the listener to inhabit each section in much the same way as in *Prime Site*. But here the durations of each section are considerably shorter and thus the connections are perhaps more obvious, despite the differences in rhythmic and gestural characteristics. As well as the process of 'flattening out' described above, the work progresses from high to low (with the exception of the first bagatelle, which is the reverse of the process as a whole encapsulated within a single section), and from a generally light-hearted, 'classical' vein to darker, at times menacing, moods. This also results in a focus on clear harmonic progressions to murkier, blurred harmonies and resultant overtones (a feature explored especially in Fox's recent works).

It is not until the eighteenth bagatelle that the melodies which form the basis of the work are heard in any discernible way. Here, 'God save the king' is played by the left hand in F major whilst 'The Red Flag' is heard above it in A flat major, no doubt a reference to Ives' experiments in bi-tonality. This marks a key transition in the piece following which the music takes on a noticeably darker tone. A similarly key moment occurs before the final few bagatelles, which are linked by material type, where two quotations are inserted, one from each of the Beethoven and Ives works.

The transformations described above speak for themselves. The final bagatelles reflect both a terrifying and exhilarating conclusion to the processes at work throughout the piece, as the bass notes produce extraordinary overtones from the piano and as the question being asked draws its conclusions.

Republican Bagatelles is dedicated to Philip Thomas.

Christopher Fox is a composer, based in the north of England, where he was born in 1955. He studied composition with Hugh Wood, Jonathan Harvey and Richard Orton at Liverpool, Southampton and York Universities and was awarded the degree of DPhil in composition from York University in 1984. In 1981 he won the composition prize of the Performing Right Society of Great Britain; since then he has established a reputation as one of the most individual composers of his generation. His work has been performed and broadcast world-wide and has featured in many of the leading new music festivals, from Montreal to St Petersburg and London to Sidney. Between 1984 and 1994 he was a member of the composition staff of the Darmstadt New Music Summer School and returned there in 1996 as a featured composers. During 1987 he lived in West Berlin as a guest of the DAAD Berlin Artists Programme. Since 1994 he has been a Senior Lecturer in Composition at the University of Huddersfield. He is also a trustee of the York Early Music Foundation and chair of the British Section of the International Society for Contemporary Music.

His writings on music have been published widely, in the journals *Contact* (of which he was an editor), *Contemporary Music Review*, *Contrechamps*, *Musical Times* and *Tempo*, and deals principally with new music, in particular experimental, minimalist and complex tendencies in American and European music. More recently he was co-editor of *Von Kranichstein zur Gegenwart* (1996, Deco Verlag, Stuttgart), a history of 50 years of the Darmstadt Ferienkurse, and of *Uncommon Ground*, a book on the music of Michael Finnissy for Ashgate Press (1998, London).

As a composer Christopher Fox has worked with many of the leading new music ensembles and soloists, including the Arditti Quartet Arraymusic (Toronto), Anthony de Mare, Roger Heaton, Rolf Hind, Ensemble Köln, Ensemble Bash, Philip Mead and the late Yvar Mikhashoff. Most recently he has established close relationships with the new generation of performers. In the Netherlands he has worked regularly with the brilliant young musicians of the Ives Ensemble who have featured his work in each of their last seven concert seasons and for whom he wrote the ensemble cycle, *Themes and Variations*; they gave its UK premiere in the 1996 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival. In Britain his work has recently been taken up by the ensemble Apartment House and by the pianist, Ian Pace, who has recorded Fox's *IliK.relliK* for the NMC label and the rest of his piano music for Metier (the first Metier CD was released in 1998 to critical acclaim; the second, including the song cycles performed by Pace and soprano Amanda Crawley, followed with equal acclaim in 1999). Further CDs of his work are in progress for Metier and HatHut. His work was featured in the BBC Promenade Concerts for the first time in 1997.

Fox has been hailed by Andy Hamilton in *The Wire* as "a tantalising figure in British Music"; Paul Driver in the *Sunday Times* has described his music as "impressive, thoughtful, entertaining and extremely varied". Fox's work regularly extends beyond the conventional boundaries of the concert hall and includes the radio piece *Three Constructions* after Kurt Schwitters, commissioned by the BBC in 1993 and nominated for the Prix Italia, gallery installations in collaboration with video artists and printmakers, a 'musical box' made with the poet Ian Duhig, and a 'pocket opera' for Ensemble Bash. In 1996 the BBC commissioned a second radio work, *Alarmed and Dangerous*, which draws together brass instruments, security alarms and millennialist warnings. Paul Griffiths, writing in the *Times*, has said of Fox's work that "he takes simple ideas but he makes them sound quite wonderful".

Philip Thomas (b.1972, North Devon) graduated from Hull University in 1993 with a 1st class honours degree in music and the Departmental Prize. He went on to study with Peter Hill at Sheffield University, gaining a Masters degree in 1994, for which he performed and studied the piano sonatas of *Sir Michael Tippett*. Remaining in Sheffield, in 1998 he was awarded a PhD in the performance practice of contemporary piano music. He is currently based in Sheffield, from where he pursues an active performing career and teaches privately and at the University. In September 2000, he was appointed Head of the Sheffield Music School.

Philip specialises in performing new and experimental music, including both notated and improvised music. His concerts are noted for being both accessible and provocative. He places much emphasis on each concert being a unique event, often addressing an underlying theme or issue. Philip's most recent solo projects have included a highly successful three-concert festival of the music of Morton Feldman, alongside three specially commissioned new works by British composers (this took place in October 2002 at the Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield, and subsequently toured venues across the country); performances of solo music by Lachenmann, Zimmermann and others in Spring 2002; and a John Cage and contemporary British composers festival in February 2001, including a number of world and British premieres. Future solo projects include a concert of music, including a number of specially commissioned pieces, composed by musicians (more) often known as improvisers.

Philip is a regular pianist with leading experimental music group Apartment House. Recent performances with them have included a 'Fluxus-Defluxus' event in Berlin as part of the 'Maerz-musik' festival; a performance in Ghent, Belgium, as part of Ghent's contemporary music series; 2 concerts at the 2002 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, including a major portrait of the music of Christian Wolff, featuring the composer himself in a rare visit to England; a Luc Ferrari/Sylvano Bussotti presentation at the 2002 Hoxton New Music Days; a world premiere by Christopher Fox, broadcast on the German radio network WDR and subsequently released on CD, in April 2002, at the Witten Neue Musik Tage, Germany; and a portrait concert of Clarence Barlow at the Hoxton New Music Festival in June 2001, which included two solo works and was subsequently broadcast on BBC Radio 3. Future concerts with Apartment House include

a BBC invitation concert in September featuring music by, among others, Christopher Fox and Laurence Crane.

Other recent collaborations have been with electronics improvising duo Transient v Resident, and Manchester-based Ensemble 11.

Philip has premiered solo works by Richard Ayres, Chris Burn, Stephen Chase, Laurence Crane, Richard Emsley, Bryn Harrison, Michael Parsons and James Saunders. His repertoire also includes works by *Clarence Barlow, Gerald Barry, Luciano Berio, John Cage, Cornelius Cardew, John Croft, George Crumb, Morton Feldman, Michael Finnissy, Graham Fitkin, Christopher Fox, György Kurtág, Helmut Lachenmann, Olivier Messiaen, James Macmillan, Per Nørgård, Katherine Norman, Arvo Pärt, Wolfgang Rihm, Robert Saxton, Howard Skempton, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Mark R.Taylor, Michael Tippett, John White, Christian Wolff, Walter Zimmermann* and others.

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